

## **Article Review: Emily Schmidt, *The Flavian Triumph and the Arch of Titus: The Jewish God in Flavian Rome***

Emily Schmidt argues that the Flavian triumph (71 CE) and the Arch of Titus (c. 81 CE) together functioned as ritual and monumental media through which the defeat of Jerusalem was reinscribed into Rome's imperial space, symbolically bringing the Jewish god into the capital via the captured Temple vessels and reinforcing Flavian dynastic authority after the civil wars of 69 CE.<sup>1</sup> Schmidt shows how procession and monument transformed the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple into an enduring statement of Flavian authority within Rome's religious topography.<sup>2</sup> Her interpretation builds upon approaches that understand the Roman triumph as a structured communicative performance rather than a mere celebration of victory, as emphasised by Mary Beard and Ida Östenberg. Yet her argument depends on the stronger claim that triumphal display could convey theological meaning about foreign gods, not merely political domination, and its persuasiveness rests on the extent to which this religious reading is supported by the literary and monumental evidence.

Schmidt interprets the Flavian triumph as a carefully orchestrated procession through which the destruction of Jerusalem became a public statement of restored imperial order in Rome after the upheavals of 69 CE.<sup>3</sup> Drawing upon Josephus' account in *The Jewish War*, she emphasises the presentation of treasures, captives, tableaux, and especially the Temple vessels, whose

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<sup>1</sup> Schmidt explicitly frames her study as an investigation into 'the ways that ritual and monument bring the Jewish god from the edge of the empire into the imperial capital, and how ritual and monument construct a Flavian dynastic identity' (p. 1), arguing that the triumphal procession and its monumental commemoration together transformed the destruction of Jerusalem into a symbolic statement of imperial order within Rome's monumental and religious environment. By analysing the procession alongside the Arch of Titus as complementary media, she interprets the display of the Temple spoils as part of a wider programme through which Flavian authority was articulated after the civil wars of 69 CE by incorporating Judaea and its god into the symbolic order of the capital. See Emily A. Schmidt, 'The Flavian Triumph and the Arch of Titus: The Jewish God in Flavian Rome', in *Beyond Borders: Selected Proceedings of the 2010 Ancient Borderlands International Graduate Student Conference* (2010), pp. 1–2 <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9xw0k5kh>.

<sup>2</sup> Schmidt interprets the triumphal procession as a ritual movement through urban space wherein '[t]he city is mapped haptically and kinetically' by passing along its principal routes and monuments, thereby 'presenting both an idealised image of the city and an idealised image of its residents' (p. 2), while the Arch of Titus subsequently functioned as a 'perpetual re-enactment of the procession' (p. 9) that continually recalled the defeat of Jerusalem within the monumental environment of the capital. Read together, procession and monument thus incorporated the destruction of the Temple into Rome's symbolic landscape and into the wider process through which 'ritual and monument construct a Flavian dynastic identity' (p. 1). See *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2, 9–10.

<sup>3</sup> See *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

prominence visually reinforced Rome's supremacy over conquered peoples.<sup>4</sup> This structuring exemplifies the broader logic identified by Östenberg, in which triumphs organised conquered peoples and their possessions into a coherent spectacle that rendered distant territories intelligible to Rome,<sup>5</sup> while, as Beard emphasises, the display re-presented victory through staged images instead of simply serving as a record of events.<sup>6</sup> Schmidt therefore interprets the Flavian procession as a visual narrative through which Judaea's defeat was publicly displayed within Rome's imperial order.<sup>7</sup>

A central feature of Schmidt's argument is the symbolic prominence she assigns to the Temple vessels within the triumphal procession, reading them as more than ordinary war booty.<sup>8</sup> Building upon Josephus' description of the menorah, the golden table, and the Torah scrolls as objects 'more prominent than all the rest' and carried immediately before 'the Jewish Law, the last of the spoils',<sup>9</sup> Schmidt argues that these sacred items functioned as symbolic representatives of the Jewish God—that with no cult statue, the Temple vessels functioned as a proxy for the deity.<sup>10</sup> Developing earlier scholarship that interpreted these vessels as standing metonymically for the divine presence associated with the Temple, Schmidt therefore proposes that their transport through the streets of Rome enacted the symbolic relocation of the Jewish God from the empire's periphery to Rome's political centre.<sup>11</sup> Thus the Temple vessels did not merely signify military success in Judaea but marked the

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<sup>4</sup> Josephus' description of the Flavian triumph stresses the deliberate visual sequencing of spoils, captives, and staged representations of the war, including tableaux that 'showed the successive stages of the war most vividly portrayed', the prominent display of Temple vessels 'more prominent than all the rest', and finally the carrying of the Jewish Law itself as 'the last of the spoils' (p. 372), thereby presenting the destruction of Jerusalem as a publicly legible narrative of Roman victory within the triumphal procession. See Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*, trans. by G. A. Williamson (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 370–373.

<sup>5</sup> Östenberg argues that triumphal processions functioned as 'the public ritual that presented the outside world to Rome', since 'many peoples and places, items and individuals, people saw for the first time', making the procession a decisive medium for constructing images of the imperial world. See Ida Östenberg, *Staging the World: Spoils, Captives, and Representations in the Roman Triumphal Procession* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Beard describes the procession as an 'extravaganza of representation' in which captives, images, models, and spoils together formed staged interpretations of victory. See Mary Beard, *The Roman Triumph* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 147.

<sup>7</sup> See Schmidt, 'The Flavian Triumph and the Arch of Titus', pp. 1–2.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>9</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War*, p. 372.

<sup>10</sup> See Schmidt, 'The Flavian Triumph and the Arch of Titus', pp. 5–6.

<sup>11</sup> Schmidt adopts Jodi Magness' proposal that the Temple vessels could function as substitutes for the absent cult image of the Jewish God, citing her argument that the menorah, table of the Presence, and Torah scrolls served to represent the Jewish god to the Romans, allowing the deity to be imagined as symbolically present within the triumphal procession. She then extends this suggestion by interpreting the procession itself as enacting the ritual relocation of divine presence from Jerusalem to Rome. See Schmidt, 'The Flavian Triumph and the Arch of Titus', p. 5; and Jodi Magness, 'The Arch of Titus and the Fate of the God of Israel', *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 59.2 (2008), 201–217 (p. 209).

symbolic subordination of Judaea's deity within a triumphal narrative that integrated the defeat of Jerusalem into the Flavian ideological programme.<sup>12</sup>

The Arch of Titus then translated the procession into a permanent visual narrative embedded within the monumental topography of the capital. The depiction of the transport of the Temple vessels stabilised the memory of the triumph, extended its temporal reach beyond a single day, and relocated its meaning for viewers, so that the imagery operated as a symbolic re-performance of the procession.<sup>13</sup> Following John Moreland, Schmidt observes that the arch communicates through symbolic rather than linear discursive means, requiring interpretation through visual syntax as opposed to textual explanation.<sup>14</sup>

Schmidt's interpretation relies heavily upon Josephus' detailed description of the Flavian triumph as evidence for the symbolic prominence of the Temple vessels within the ritual sequence of the procession.<sup>15</sup> Yet Josephus' account cannot be treated as a transparent record of Roman ceremonial intention.<sup>16</sup> As Steve Mason has emphasised, Josephus wrote within the rhetorical conventions of elite Graeco-Roman historiography, in which authors frequently employed figured and indirect modes of expression shaped by the expectations of their audiences and patrons.<sup>17</sup> Composed under Flavian sponsorship and addressed to readers within the imperial world, *The Jewish War* therefore presents the triumph through a literary framework that participates in the representation of Flavian legitimacy instead of offering a neutral account of its ritual meaning.

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<sup>12</sup> Schmidt therefore interprets the procession as a ritual act that 'bring[s] the Jewish god from the edge of the empire into the imperial capital', integrating the conquest of Jerusalem into the construction of Flavian dynastic identity through both ritual performance and monumental commemoration. See Schmidt, *The Flavian Triumph and the Arch of Titus*, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Jaś Elsner emphasises that viewers 'relate to works of art in different ways, depending upon different contexts and at different times' (p. 1), and that images function not merely as representations but as symbolic signs whose meaning emerges through interpretation—'to move from the initial perception of a picture to the meaning or referent which one understands the picture to be evoking is rather a complex process . . . a dynamic of interpretation' (p. 2). Such an approach supports Schmidt's reading of the Arch of Titus as a monument whose imagery required viewers to interpret the transport of the Temple vessels within a broader symbolic narrative of Flavian victory. See Jaś Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 1–2.

<sup>14</sup> See Schmidt, 'The Flavian Triumph and the Arch of Titus', p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Schmidt's reconstruction of the procession is grounded in Josephus' ordering of the triumphal display, especially his statement that the Temple vessels were 'more prominent than all the rest' of the spoils, from which she develops her interpretation of their symbolic significance. See Josephus, *The Jewish War*, p. 372.

<sup>16</sup> Schmidt notes that Josephus 'may have been an eye witness to the procession'. See Schmidt, 'The Flavian Triumph and the Arch of Titus', p. 1. However, the evidential value of his description remains conditioned by the literary conventions of Flavian historiography within which his narrative operates.

<sup>17</sup> Steve Mason notes that ancient historiography frequently employed 'figured' or 'refracted' speech (p. 243), through which writers could encode meanings shaped by rhetorical situation and audience expectation, and emphasises the importance of recognising the interpretive distance between Josephus' narrative voice and the events he describes. See Steve Mason, 'Figured Speech and Irony in T. Flavius Josephus', in *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, ed. by Jonathan Edmondson, Steve Mason, and James Rives (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 243–288 (pp. 243, 248).

Therefore, Josephus' description cannot be read straightforwardly as a record of Roman ritual intention but must instead be understood within the conventions of elite Flavian historiography. The prominence he assigns to the Temple vessels may thus reflect historiographical shaping as much as ceremonial reality.

Schmidt's argument likewise depends upon the evidential weight she assigns to the Arch of Titus itself, which she describes as a monument that 'serves as perpetual re-enactment of the procession' and repeatedly displays 'the captivity of the Jewish god' within the urban space of Rome.<sup>18</sup> Yet triumphal monuments must be approached as interpretive visual constructions shaped by the representational conventions of Roman victory culture. As Mary Beard has shown, triumphal spectacle functioned as representation in which spoils, images, and captives staged interpretations of victory rather than providing transparent documentation of events, so that monuments deriving from this context likewise participate in the same representational framework and cannot be treated as explanatory evidence independent of that context.<sup>19</sup> Ida Östenberg similarly emphasises that spoils and cultic objects within triumphal display formed part of a structured visual syntax in which conquered peoples and their sacred objects were positioned within a hierarchical presentation of Roman domination and not theological transformation.<sup>20</sup> While the monument clearly presents the Temple vessels as trophies of conquest, the inference in Schmidt's reading—that it represents the symbolic relocation of Israel's God within Roman sacred space—requires stronger evidence than the monument itself supplies.

An important strength of Schmidt's approach lies in her recognition that Roman triumphal ritual functioned not merely as a record of military success but as a communicative performance through which political and religious meaning was publicly articulated.<sup>21</sup> As Jonathan Z. Smith has argued, ritual creates a controlled environment in which significance is produced through selection, ordering, and repetition—not simply as a reflection of prior belief.<sup>22</sup> Within such settings, objects acquire symbolic force through their placement within a structured sequence that directs attention and interpretation, thus making the appearance of the Temple vessels part of a deliberate representational

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<sup>18</sup> See Schmidt, *The Flavian Triumph and the Arch of Titus*, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> See Beard, *The Roman Triumph*, p. 147.

<sup>20</sup> Ida Östenberg stresses that triumphal display must be analysed in terms of the procession's visual 'syntax', structured through 'categorisation, sequence, interplay, and the composition of the totality' (p. 9), within which spoils, captives, and representations formed 'the group of others' positioned before the triumphator as the 'visual peak of the performance' (p. 263). See Östenberg, *Staging the World*, pp. 9, 263.

<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith argues that ritual space functions as a 'focusing lens, marking and revealing significance', within which events are interpreted as meaningful rather than accidental. See Jonathan Z. Smith, 'The Bare Facts of Ritual', in *Imagining Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 53–65 (p. 54).

<sup>22</sup> Smith describes ritual as 'the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (i.e., the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced', allowing significance to be actively constructed within the ritual setting itself. See *Ibid.*, p. 63.

arrangement through which Roman power over Judaea was made intelligible to spectators.<sup>23</sup> Schmidt is therefore justified in treating the triumph as communication through which political domination is expressed via ritualised visual language.<sup>24</sup>

Yet the application of ritual theory to the Flavian triumph must be balanced against the character of Roman civic religion itself. As James B. Rives has demonstrated, Graeco-Roman religious practice was defined less by doctrinal formulations about the status of particular deities than by the correct performance of inherited ritual actions within established civic frameworks.<sup>25</sup> The symbolic prominence of the Temple vessels within the triumphal display therefore need not imply a developed theological claim concerning the relocation or subordination of Israel's God within Roman sacred space. Schmidt, however, interprets the treatment of the Jewish god as an inversion of the traditional Roman *evocatio*—a ritual through which foreign deities might be invited to transfer their protection to Rome.<sup>26</sup> Yet such sacred vessels functioned primarily as visible markers of conquest incorporated into a public performance whose meaning derived from ordering and representation rather than explicit theological interpretation.<sup>27</sup> Schmidt presses the argument further by suggesting that the display of the Temple vessels in the Temple of Peace presented the Jewish god not merely as conquered but as effectively inanimate.<sup>28</sup> Her argument thus presupposes a level of theological intentionality that Roman civic religion rarely articulated explicitly. The triumph communicated Roman domination over Judaea, but it did so through ritualised

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<sup>23</sup> Smith further notes that ritual functions to negotiate the tension between ideal order and lived reality by 'performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are'. See *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Smith understands place as a 'locus of meaning' (p. 28), drawing explicitly on Yi-Fu Tuan's formulation that 'what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value', such that 'each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place' (p. 6). See Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 28; and Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Rives emphasises that in the Graeco-Roman world 'there was no mechanism . . . to define or much less to impose "correct" beliefs about the divine world', since civic officials were primarily concerned with ritual performance as opposed to doctrinal formulation. See James B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Blackwell Ancient Religions; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 49.

<sup>26</sup> See Schmidt, 'The Flavian Triumph and the Arch of Titus', p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> Rives observes that 'the crucial element of any civic cult was the correct performance of the prescribed rituals' and that 'the marker of piety . . . was external behavior rather than internal belief'. See Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, p. 49.

<sup>28</sup> Schmidt argues that Roman triumphal convention normally treated divine statues as spoils rather than captives and interprets the display of the Temple vessels in the Temple of Peace 'as if in a museum' as reinforcing their classification as inanimate objects, concluding that the display functioned 'as if to settle the question once and for all: the Jewish god isn't even animate' (p. 6). She further observes that '[w]ith the destruction of *both* Jewish temples, Vespasian effectively ended Jewish religion as he understood religion. After all, the temple and sacrificial cult were the parts of Jewish practice that were most like Roman practices and most like the Roman concept of religion' (p. 8). See Schmidt, 'The Flavian Triumph and the Arch of Titus', p. 6, 8.

representation and civic precedent without implying a systematic redefinition of the divine status of the conquered cult itself.<sup>29</sup>

Despite these limitations, Schmidt's article makes several important contributions to scholarship on the representation of the Judaean War in Flavian Rome. First, her emphasis on the Temple vessels as instruments of symbolic displacement foregrounds the religious dimension of triumphal display in a way that sharpens existing interpretations of the procession's visual programme. Secondly, by treating the Arch of Titus as a continuation of the triumphal sequence and not simply as a commemorative monument, she highlights the continuity between ritual movement and monumental representation within Flavian strategies of collective memory formation. Finally, her interpretation situates the display of the Temple spoils within the wider context of Flavian dynastic consolidation, drawing attention to the role played by the Judaean victory in establishing the legitimacy of a newly founded imperial house.<sup>30</sup> Schmidt interprets this display as reinforcing the Jewish god's subordination in Rome's monumental environment. As Fergus Millar observes, the Jewish War represented an unusually large-scale military enterprise within the imperial period and formed the principal basis upon which Vespasian could construct public prestige following his accession in 69 CE.<sup>31</sup> Schmidt accordingly compares the ideological function of the Jerusalem victory for the Flavians with that of Actium for the Julio-Claudians, emphasising the centrality of military success for dynastic legitimacy in the absence of inherited authority.<sup>32</sup> Martin Goodman likewise emphasises that the defeat of Judaea became central to Flavian propaganda in Rome itself, where the monumental topography of the city was reshaped to reflect victory over the Jews and their

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<sup>29</sup> More broadly, Rives notes that inhabitants of the Roman world commonly assumed foreign deities to be either 'a deity previously unknown to them' or 'a familiar deity worshipped under another name', in either case concluding that 'the proper thing to do was to acknowledge and honor the deity'. He further observes that within this shared religious framework 'there was no need to convert people from one "religion" to another', indicating that Roman interaction with foreign cults did not normally depend upon exclusive theological claims about the status of other gods. See Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire*, p. 132.

<sup>30</sup> Josephus' account already marks the Temple vessels as visually exceptional within the triumph. See Josephus, *The Jewish War*, p. 372. Martin Goodman later underlines the continuing ideological force of this display, noting that '[t]he precious utensils from the Temple were placed on permanent display in the temple of Pax' and that, 'by both symbolic and practical actions', the Flavian state appeared to have brought Jewish worship to an end (p. 170). See Martin Goodman, 'The Fiscus Iudaicus and Gentile Attitudes to Judaism in Flavian Rome', in *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, ed. by Jonathan Edmondson, Steve Mason, and James Rives (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 167–178 (p. 170).

<sup>31</sup> Fergus Millar stresses that the Jewish War required a 'massive concentration of forces' (p. 101) and that Vespasian, lacking inherited prestige, depended upon the victory to enhance the standing of the new Flavian dynasty. See Fergus Millar, 'Last Year in Jerusalem: Monuments of the Jewish War in Rome', in *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, ed. by Jonathan Edmondson, Steve Mason, and James Rives, pp. 101–128 (pp. 101–102).

<sup>32</sup> Schmidt explicitly compares the ideological importance of the Jerusalem victory for the Flavian dynasty with that of Actium for the Julio-Claudians, emphasising that Vespasian's legitimacy rested primarily upon military success rather than inherited authority. See Schmidt, 'The Flavian Triumph and the Arch of Titus', p. 8.

cult.<sup>33</sup> Read against this wider political context, Schmidt's interpretation usefully foregrounds the religious symbolism through which that victory was monumentalised.

Schmidt offers a compelling reading of the Flavian triumph and the Arch of Titus as ritual and monumental media through which Roman authority over Judaea was publicly articulated. By emphasising the symbolic prominence of the Temple vessels and their integration into Rome's monumental environment, she demonstrates the role of triumphal display in shaping imperial memory of the Judaeen War. Yet her argument attributes to Roman civic religion a degree of theological intentionality that its ritual structures seldom warranted. The triumph is therefore better understood as primarily enacting political domination rather than theological displacement of the Judaeen god. Nevertheless, Schmidt convincingly shows how the triumph and the arch transformed military victory into a durable narrative of Flavian restoration, while the theological implications of this representation remain interpretively open.

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<sup>33</sup> Goodman observes that 'the civic centre was largely remodelled to reflect the victory over the Jews and their God', demonstrating the centrality of the Judaeen War within Flavian ideological self-presentation. See Goodman, 'The *Fiscus Iudaicus* and Gentile Attitudes to Judaism in Flavian Rome', p. 171.

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